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Savoie: Trying to aid opera here

Robert Savoie: Singer wants to administer

By JACOB SISKIND
of The Gazette

"When you sing you give us a great deal of pleasure, but when you talk, you give us a great deal to worry about."

That was the comment of a deputy minister of Cultural Affairs in Quebec to Robert Savoie, the Canadian baritone who has spent the past year looking into the problems of opera in Quebec.

Savoie, who has spent the past twenty years performing opera in London, Paris, Toulouse, Italy and every other part of the operatic world, is concerned that Canadian singers, and particularly those from this area, have no outlet for their talents.

"We have a number of schools that produce performers right here in this city but they have nowhere to go once they graduate — and I think that that is dishonest. Why encourage young people to take up a career and then fail to provide outlets for them?

"Whenever I sing in France people always ask me why I am singing there and not in Canada."

YEAR OFF

Savoie decided it was time to do something about it last year — so he took a year off from his performing career in order to look into the whole problem of performers in Quebec.

During the decade he was at Covent Garden and at Sadler's Wells in London, he made a habit of looking into things — like the administration, the back-stage operation, the hiring and firing, the contractual procedures and the other little items that make up the running of a major opera company.

This experience was invaluable to him and he feels he is now qualified to take over the operation of an opera company here in Canada.

"You have no idea how much money was squandered by the administration of L'Opéra du Québec simply because the people there were afraid or ashamed to say 'no' to requests for additional time or money.

"If a conductor asked for an extra rehearsal, he got it, no matter what it cost. If a costume or a pair of shoes did not fit, another was made. Just for a lark I said I was uncomfortable in a pair of shoes that had been provided for me in the production of Falstaff. They told me to go out and get another pair made.

"I was unhappy with the fur piece on the jacket of my costume, so they scrapped the costume and got me another."

Of course these are only trivial expenditures, but Savoie feels that they are indicative of the last way in which the Opera du Québec operation was being run. Of far greater importance was the overtime bill for the orchestral musicians and the stage hands. These, according to Savoie, were simply astronomical.

And he feels they were totally unnecessary.

"Opera does not have to be expensive," he insisted. "It must look lavish, but it is the illusion that counts — not the money you actually have to spend."

"I have been sacrificing my own career to get opera started in Quebec — an opera that would be an outlet for the talent we have here. There are literally dozens of singers from this area who have been forced to make their careers elsewhere and that doesn't make sense.

"If we were to bring all these people back, as Mayor Drapeau said he would, over a decade ago, we would be able to cast any number of important operas with the greatest of ease.

"I feel that I and my colleagues are entitled to live and work in their own country.

"Why do we always have to think so big? Do big productions, pay big salaries, get big names?"

CUT BACK

Savoie pointed out that when L'Opéra du Québec began in 1950, Marcel Pichè — who headed it at that time — told him that the company expected to open with four productions and gradually increase its activity to five, seven and then ten productions a year.

Rising costs — due, he feels, to a self-indulgent management — meant a continual cut back rather than an expansion, and it had nothing to do with inflation.

Last year Savoie threw his hat into the ring for the post of artistic director of L'Opéra du Québec. So far he's had no answer.

Of course there has been a change at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs recently and that has set things back. But Savoie has been facing the usual blank wall one meets whenever one tries to make contact with people at the Ministry.

A year ago last July, I tried to make contact with someone in Quebec who would authorize an interview with Raymond Daveluy, who had then been appointed the director of the Conservatory in Montreal. It seems that civil servants in Quebec are not permitted to give interviews without the permission of the ministry that employs them.

I am still waiting, 16 months later, for that interview.

Savoie has only been waiting nine months — so there is, presumably, still hope.

TEACHER

In the interval, Savoie, who has accepted no engagements for the entire period, with the exception of a brief flirtation with cabaret opera in Ottawa in July, has been living off his savings. Opera singers do not qualify for unemployment insurance benefit.

He has been offered a post as a singing teacher at the Conservatoire but he feels that that is a total waste of time, in present circumstances.

He has also been commissioned to do a six month study of the role of the conservatories in Quebec — just after a number of other studies have covered the same area extensively.

In the interim, while waiting for the godots of the culture ministry, he is giving a course in operatic production and acting at the Saidye Bronfman Centre. These will not be singing lessons but help for those who do not know what to do with themselves during the silences in the arias they sing in opera.

"I want to make them forget who they are and let them concentrate on who they are supposed to be," he commented.

It seems to me that a lot of people other than opera singers need lessons in that.

Blackmore's Rainbow: Crisper than Purple

Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow is described by the former lead guitarist of Deep Purple as a "new musical spectrum." The rainbow is evidently metaphoric, as Blackmore had tired of playing heavy Purple sludge.

"We're going to have much more emphasis on melody," says Blackmore, who plays the Forum on Nov. 10. "Everything isn't going to be hung on a riff."

At first, this may not come as good news to those rabid Deep Purple fans who jammed the Forum three years ago mainly to be pounded out of their skulls by the band, which became one of the biggest in the world (selling 14 million discs in one year alone) by knocking out their fans with high voltage.

Although Blackmore says his new "spectrum" was inspired by J.S. Bach and German Baroque music, with many of his new compositions making use of medieval modes ("The white keys on the piano," he notes), the guitarist is still a rocker at heart. He left Deep Purple because "they were all competing with each other. It started out as fun and became very serious. Stormbringer was an album I hated to record, it was so sloppy, which is when I realized I could no longer take our fans for a ride."

So, after hanging around los Angeles for awhile, he met up with singer Ronnie James Dio (formerly of the British group Elf), "got him drunk and decided to do an album together."

The sound of the first album by Blackmore's Rainbow (on Polydor) is crisper than Deep Purple's, but it's still heavy. The guitarist may well have become enamoured with classical music, but he has not forgotten to come up with a new number, Catch the Rainbow, with moody shades of the Purple's classic Smoke On the Water.

And even though Blackmore modestly claims he's not concerned whether or not the band makes piles of money, he has taken the precaution of adding legendary drummer Cozy Powell (who starred with Jeff Beck) for the first American tour. "I was going to pack it in and try my luck at racing cars," says Powell, "but after three numbers with Rainbow it was all happening."

The piece de resistence is the staging — a 30-foot fibreglass rainbow with enough room inside for Blackmore to take a solo stroll.

Nightly rock fare

Last night's Red Stewart show kicked off a stream of nightly rock fare from international acts.

Tonight there's the flautist Eric Weissberg at the Outremont theatre. Weissberg has a lush mellow style and he traverses the territory between rock and jazz with a sensitive feathery approach.

Tomorrow night at the Udell's Centre Sportif, the innovative British pop group 10cc makes its local debut. This quartet features extraordinary production work on their albums, especially the much-acclaimed Original Soundtrack, and it will be interesting to see how this approach translates in concert.

Another British band with a growing following with Montreal rock fans is Caravan, a quintet taking over Cafe Campus on Monday and Tuesday evenings. This group conveys a complex style steeped in numerous musical traditions and played on a plethora of instruments.

Sonny Greenwich, the local jazz guitarist who has been described by John McLaughlin and Larry Coryell, as a major influence on their styles, gives a rare concert tonight at Concordia University.

Greenwich, born in Hamilton and a longtime CBC session man in Toronto, once played in the John Handy Quintet and led a trio of his own a few years back with, ex-John Coltrane sidemen Jimmy Garrison and Jack de Johnette.

His current sextet includes two well-known keyboardists (Don Thompson and Doug Riley), and the popular Montreal-born drummer Claude Ranger.

Ritchie Blackmore

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by Juan Rodriguez

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